



Tina Pack: "I'm not willing to throw the children anywhere. Private day care is expensive, and city agencies have long waiting lists."

HEAD OF THE HOUSE

PHOTOGRAPH BY SYLVIA PLACHY

One of the cruelest elements of Pataki's welfare proposal is that it would punish children for the "sins" of their parents. If the head of a household cannot find work, doesn't meet welfare regulations, or tests positive for illegal drugs, the cash benefits of everyone in the home, *including children*, would be reduced or eliminated altogether.

Not even orphans are spared—and there are thousands of them on welfare. In New York City, HIV alone has robbed an estimated 25,000 children of their mothers (usually fathers are absent, because of unemployment, addiction, jail, HIV). Because AIDS and drugs hit poor people hardest, many orphans are being taken care of by people who love them but have little money.

Ten-year-old Reginald and two-year-old Patricia lost their mother to cancer last month. Their aunt, Tina Pack, a single mother with six children of her own, has taken them in. All nine now live in Tina's two-bedroom apartment, piled high with books and bikes and board games, on the 13th floor of a Bronx project.

Every morning Tina sends Reginald and her oldest daughter, Jasmine, to a Manhattan school. Though far away, the school is worth it, Tina says, because it offers extra cultural programs sponsored by the Metropolitan Opera and Lincoln Center. Reginald likes it because "the kids aren't as mean as they are around here. They don't fight as much." In the afternoon she meets them at the subway station to walk them home. Noting the drug trafficking, she says, "I don't feel safe enough

to have Reginald walk those three blocks. He's very innocent, and I don't want him to get caught up in anything."

Right now, Tina gets \$730 a month in cash benefits. She figures she'll get about another \$270 for the two orphans and her new infant. Excluding her disabled five-year-old, Josias, who gets extra money that must only be used for him, that makes \$1000 a month in cash for seven children and herself.

But if Tina doesn't find a job in 18 months, Pataki's welfare proposal, which is harsher than the federal legislation, would reduce her cash assistance by 10 per cent, even if she is in a welfare program. And benefits would keep shrinking until, after five years, all cash is replaced with a voucher system that has no guaranteed funding and, indeed, no clear legal definition. Tina could be forced to feed her brood with only food stamps. Right now, they buy only enough food for Tina's family to last two and a half to three weeks a month.

So what would she do if her cash benefits were reduced? Reginald's violin lessons would have to go, and to save on subway fare, he and Jasmine might have to leave the good school in Manhattan and go to one they could walk to.

And if cash benefits were wholly eliminated? Tina pauses, then says softly, "That's scary."

So why doesn't Tina get a job? In fact, she wants to work—"if I could find reliable, safe daycare. I'm not willing to throw the children anywhere." The problem, she says, is "private day care is very expensive, and the nonprofit and city agencies have long waiting lists." She needs care for at least five children, but especially now, with so many women forced into welfare, "getting that many slots is not workable."

Meanwhile, Tina does have work, though the governor doesn't recognize it. Raising kids, she says, is "definitely a full-time job."

—MARK SCHOOF